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What West should do about chemical warfare

WASHINGTON - In recent weeks Vietnamese spray planes have swooped low over Cambodian refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border, dropping yellow powder. Some of the sweeps penetrated into Thailand.

A blatant step-up of "yellow rain" chemical warfare, flaunted despite mounting accusations by the United States that the Soviet Union and its Vietnamese allies are waging warfare with banned toxin agents?

Curiously, unlike somewhat similar substances dropped elsewhere in Cambodia and Laos, this yellow powder did not cause illness or death to humans and animals and did not harm plant life. Careful lab analysis only deepened the mystery; it found the powder was harmless, ground-up flower petals and pollen.

Why would the Vietnamese go to all the trouble of dumping pulverized flowers on their enemies?

American intelligence has concluded the flower drop was a sophisticated effort to undermine the credibility of United States charges. By penetrating into Thailand, the analysts suggest, the Vietnamese wanted to make sure that samples would be easily available for collection and analysis - suggesting strongly that the American charges were ridiculous.

However, in a recent artillery attack by Vietnamese forces against Khmer Rouge guerrillas in Tuol Chrey, Cambodia, yellow substances from the exploding shells caused severe bloody vomiting and diarrhea, along with difficulty in breathing. Blood samples drawn shortly after the attack from two guerrillas were rushed to a US lab within 48 hours and showed significant presence of deadly mycotoxins.

Previous evidence advanced by the United States was only of the presence of mycotoxins in soil, vegetation and water samples, not in human beings. This was the first solid evidence that men who claimed to have been under chemical attack actually had the poisons in their bodies.

State Department officials assert that this proves that notwithstanding a major publicity cam-

paign, reports continue to come in from Cambodia, Laos and Afghanistan of continued gas and toxin attacks. This, despite the fact the Soviet Union claims to be in compliance with the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention of 1972 which bars the manufacture, storage, use or transfer of such agents. Both the Carter and Reagan administrations have asserted that the toxins are of Soviet origin.

What then can be done? Policy decisions are yet to be made, but the logical options include the following:

- Urging a neutralist country, such as Switzerland or Sweden, to call for the reconvening this year of the biological warfare convention to write a verification amendment requiring on-site inspection of facilities suspected of manufacturing illegal agents. The Soviet Union could hardly refuse to attend such a meeting without suggesting guilt.

- Stepped-up Western research and development of antidotes for new agents and better masks and other defensive gear, to be provided to NATO forces as well as to countries such as Thailand and Pakistan which are particularly apprehensive about the possibility of falling victim to attacks. China, too, is said to be similarly worried, given its long, contested border with the Soviet Union.

- Appeals to the UN Secretary General to either augment or replace a special team which has been looking into claims of violations, but which has been criticized by the US as biased.

- Interesting international health organizations in locating and treating refugees from Laos, Cambodia and Afghanistan, some of whom are only coming down with serious complications from chemical warfare exposure six and more months after attack.

- Stronger efforts at drafting a Chemical Warfare Treaty, with strong compliance provisions, including on-site inspection. Activity to date has bogged down in aimless discussions in Geneva after the failure of the US and Russia to agree on verification procedures.

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